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Reading New Worlds

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My earliest understandings of the agency of story exist within my memories of the third grade. While, in later years, much has helped refine those childhood insights, nothing has served to nullify them.

Both my parents were readers; interestingly, they seldom read to us. My mother, raised in various log cabins in the north of Alberta, was a human tome of macabre stories involving young girls falling off horses and dying of concussion, of schoolhouses catching fire, of bodies stored in granaries waiting until spring to be buried, of the roving uncle who dropped in annually for his bath, of long-haired hermits and keening widows, of stillborn babies swathed in cotton batting and buried in roughhewn boxes.

The stories of my father's family were constructed from the shadowed allusions, made by aging aunts and uncles, to the atrocities of Stalinist Russia. These fragments, told with unfocused eyes and flushed faces, were more fearful for their imagined horror than for details truly known. Like my mother's tales, the theories they inspired threaded through my days, organizing my interpretations of the world as an unpredictable, adventurous place, with exotic events and hidden dangers waiting to be experienced and conquered, or avoided.

Such was my association with story until I went to school.

Grades one and two were spent in plaid phonics workbooks, exploring the "wonders" of /a/ and /b/, and in primers filled with the tidy images of suburban life: sidewalks defining road from yard, fences dividing neighbour from neighbour, milkmen in white, postmen in blue, pets and mothers confined to houses, autumn leaves chastened into neat piles, all incomprehensible to Mennonite farm children who, though well-versed in moral boundaries, knew nothing of physical ones, running from field to field, unfettered except when in school. School...where the habit of reading belonged. There, adults would teach bland stories of pristine children whose excitement lay in visiting markets and bakeries, unknown places from the world-out-there. But our lives were spent in the barns and the bush. Such readings could not entangle the defenders of great haycastles, the navigators of the cesspool rafts.

Then, in grade three, we made two new acquaintances. The first was Miss Johnson with her merry walk and shiny red hair. With her, she brought books. Real books. Books with characters that did things-Enid Blyton's Famous Five lived escapades that even we had never imagined. We joined them every day through her strong voice, a generous mixture of laughter and authority. Sometimes she read for fifteen minutes. Sometimes she would go on for an hour. It was never long enough. That year, I rode my bicycle along the hedgerows of Blyton's England, met Tennyson in the ponds of L.M. Montgomery's Prince Edward Island, cowered in the dens beneath the fantasy forests of Thornton W. Burgess, hid from the flying monkeys in Baum's Oz, and listened to the frozen winds that blew across Wilder's prairies. Most importantly, my classmates did the same and, through our collective creativity, we extended the stories to the playground, acting out the chapters under the trees, down the hill, and in the creek. We WERE Anne and Dorothy; we saw the creatures of the woods and became their conversations. Miss Johnson's books lived at recess, lunch and after school, grabbing us from the ballfields and sending us on worldly journeys. While in later grades other teachers would read to us, none of them read as one of us the way that Miss Johnson did. None of them had the magic in their voices

nor the habit of stopping and laughing at the images. None of them read with such joy.

Cynthia also entered our lives that year. She was a "foster kid" who came from Vancouver to live on a farm with an elderly couple who had no children. It soon became clear that she was not the city-pressed Jane of our first grade readers. When, in our childhood naiveté, we asked why she wasn't living with her family, she answered that they did not want her around. This was unbelievable to us. Surrounded by uncles, aunts, and cousins, and great-uncles, great-aunts, and second cousins, family was a concept we never questioned. Family was everywhere. We boasted about the numbers of relatives we had in our church, our school, our classroom. Family and friendship were indivisible.

Cynthia had no family, one of many characteristics that marked her as different. She also swore, cheated, and fought. Her boldness in telling lies amazed us; we had been taught that the survival of our souls depended upon our honesty.

She was not, however, lacking in redeeming qualities: As actors of some standing, we soon recognized that her short, unruly hair and uncensored tongue made her the perfect adventurer for our noon-hour stage. She could laugh with more conviction than the rest of us, sigh with greater meaning, run with more agility, and scream with authenticity. We were mesmerized by her sparkle and awed by the passion she brought to our troupe. It was as though one of the characters in Miss Johnson's books had moved in with us; we immediately identified her as familiar and silenced our objections to her real-life behaviours.

But then we began to suspect that Cynthia also stole. At first, little things like misplaced pencils and erasers reappeared in Cynthia's desk. Soon, mittens and toques and stickers were inexplicably "lost." Miss Johnson, it seemed, remained oblivious to the undercurrents in the classroom as this child from the outside caused greater and greater disruption to the order of our lives.

One day my mother's gold chain disappeared. She had received it, with a locket, as an engagement present from my father and, in a culture that repudiated "adornment," it was her only piece of good jewellery. But I had begged and begged that I be allowed to use it to hold the cracked-marble pendant that I had made at girls' club the night before. Finally my mother had given in, with the understanding that I would be very careful not to break the chain. And so, at lunch hour, anticipating the dangers of creeks and branches, I took it off and placed it in a straight line in the pencil indentation on the top of my desk. As I did up the clasp, I was careful not to tangle its delicate links, just as my mother had shown me. And then, trusting in my precautions, I dashed to the playground.

When I came back, the necklace was gone.

Miss Johnson made us search the classroom. Rather than single out any one student, she made each of us responsible for our own desk. I was sure that Cynthia was the thief; she had been asking me about that marble all morning. I itched to go over and hunt through her desk myself. Perhaps anticipating my train of thought, and wanting to avert any action, Miss Johnson sent me to comb the schoolyard. When I returned, she was reading to the class. I quietly sat down at my desk but, for the first time, I could not concentrate. My mind was focusing on forcing an admission of guilt out of Cynthia. Like the Famous Five, I could solve this mystery if only I had the opportunity and the courage!

Miss Johnson's voice moved on. The silence of thirty-five enraptured minds drummed in my ears. I debated: Should I tell Miss Johnson of my suspicions? Should I tell her that Cynthia had said that she wanted a necklace just like mine? Should I demand a search and, if Miss Johnson resisted, go to the principal? to my

parents? to other adults? If I did, what would happen?

Though I was only eight, I knew my power in that community. Almost everyone in the class was somehow related to my family. Community pressure and loyalty would be on my side, not on Cynthia's-not, for that matter, on Miss Johnson's. If I insisted on a search, it would eventually take place and the possibility existed that I would get the necklace back. If I said nothing, it was very likely that my mother would never see her chain again. This would be a great loss and I knew it. But what about the loss to Cynthia if I openly accused her, perhaps falsely? She would be either angry or outcast, or both. And then the most terrible thought: Would my words jeopardize her treasured fervour in our dramas? The enchantment of our play would be lost if she did not join. Though I could not know why, the world of these books had become crucial to me, a portal to places I had no other way of reaching. The camaraderie of acting and creating story, this tenuous corporate joining with the world-out-there, had caught my soul.

My choice was deliberate: I would not confront Cynthia; I would not voice my suspicions to Miss Johnson. There would be no investigations.

I listened as Miss Johnson read, my head on my desk, the cadence of her voice calming me into a restful place. I created the setting as it would look in the bush. I imagined my friends, including the energetic Cynthia, reenacting the parts, mouthing the words Miss Johnson was saying. I saw the expressions on their faces and watched as their feet moved across our forested stage. The rest of the afternoon, instead of thinking Social Studies, relying heavily on the cross of forgiveness my mother carried as the organizer of her faith, I created the tale of woe that would protect me from her censure.

The logic I presented could not be contested: Hadn't I done what my mother had told me to do? I had been so careful. How was I to know that someone might steal the necklace? No, I had no idea who might have taken it. Shouldn't the teacher have done more to find it?

I do not know that my mother ever accepted that loss; each time I ask to borrow something, her eyes refer to it, and I have learned to limit my requests. At the time, however, I managed to avoid all blame.

And so, I discerned early the power of story: its mysterious hold over me, its persuasive potential with others. I learned that I valued the exercise of the imagination and would go to great lengths to protect the environment that harboured its expression. I experienced, for the first time, the tension arising from the fragility and concurrent importance of childhood friendship. Most importantly, I learned that I valued Cynthia deeply, not despise, but because of, her quirks. The surprise of her presence exploded any trace of boredom.

Without Miss Johnson's stories, I do not know that I would have been able to develop that confusing affinity. Before I identified with Cynthia, I identified with characters like her finding place in established communities like ours. Before I could appreciate the courage it took for her to enter our cloistered settlement, I stood within the bravado of the orphaned Anne Shirley who urgently negotiated her contribution to the conservative community of Avonlea. Before I valued the force of Cynthia's unaccustomed vocabulary, I felt justice in the anxious, cutting words of Alice in her Wonderland. In the time before television acquainted us with many definitions of "normal," if not for those stories, I believe I might have stood to the side, merely judging, with no delight in Cynthia's uniqueness, with no appreciation of the possibilities offered by difference.

I have often wondered why Miss Johnson's books, among all the experiences of school and of childhood,

have stood out as important. I believe their magic lay in being presented, so clearly, from the child's point of view. The books that brought us Dick and Jane, like many of the basal readers we met in later years, represented adults describing to us their view of our world-the sanitized version that grown-ups see when they glance in the direction of children. The narrators told us to watch Jane and did not take us behind her eyes into her thinking, her motivations, her life: "See Jane jump and run," not "I see...I jump...I run." We could not identify with Jane. We could only stand on the sidelines and watch her.

By way of contrast, Miss Johnson's stories, regardless of setting, were written from within the child's experience: the shadowed consciousness of an interfering adult society; the endless intensity of Now and the misty distance of Future; the dreams of heroism; the torturous relationships. This perspective was something that Cynthia and I and our classmates shared. Despite our many differences, the acting of these tales allowed us to express, safely, our common fears of unknown beings and events, our vulnerability to adults and their decisions, our enjoyment of friendship; the experience of being not-adult, of being fully child, in many different roles. The drama was for us a commonplace experience (Sumara, 1996) that brought together ourselves, the characters, our interpretations of those characters based on our experiences and values, the authors' experiences and values, the settings of the stories, the setting of the play, Miss Johnson's voice as she interpreted the authors' words, and all the relationships involved in the negotiation of the scenes. In the enjoyment of that negotiation, we changed. As we tried on new voices, we created our own. As we experimented with gesture, we learned new ways of moving. As we traveled from England to Kansas to PEI, we entertained notions of residence beyond our dying farms. We emerged from the play as different people with new possibilities, new allegiances. We formed our own society. In becoming its members, we also re-formed ourselves.

Cynthia was integral to the creation of that rich narrative and, as such, became integral to our beings (Kerby, 1991). It was no longer a simple matter of inclusion; she was part of what we had become. To exclude her would have meant to reject the whole thing. Without Cynthia, there was no us, there was no play, there was no me. On the day of the necklace, I declared my allegiance. My mother, and all of adult society, would survive this loss, great as it might be. My society, my Self, could not survive if Cynthia were destroyed.

She is with me still. I hear myself defending her when facing students who have excluded others due to clothing, colour, or background. I feel the attachment to unruly little urchins who wreak havoc in hallways. I find my mind wondering to her as I endure workshops about classroom management, discipline, and ADD. How would today's teachers deal with her?

Miss Johnson opened the space for us to write Cynthia into our selves. Did she do this deliberately? Did she involve deep sociological or pedagogical principles in her decision making? Or was she surviving her first year of teaching, much as I did mine, by filling in great chunks of her daybook with "Teacher Read Aloud," sharing stories enjoyed as a child, knowing their potential to effect learning and community in unpredictable ways? Whatever the motivation, her choice was wise. By involving us in "reading the word," she opened up the possibility of both understanding and challenging our limited "reading of the world" (Freire, 1996, p. 42). She invited us to imagine, collectively, new worlds and, in doing that, performed an important step in helping to create them.

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